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An Analysis of Themes and Plots

By MARTHA WOLFENSTEIN and NATHAN LEITES

THIS paper presents part of a larger study of contemporary American movies in which we analyzed the content of 67 Hollywood movies released in New York City between September 1, 1945 and September 1, 1946. These were all the grade-A movies with a contemporary American urban setting. Our study intends to ascertain the Hollywood variants of the love and hostility themes which pervade the dramatic plots of western culture. The study also aims to relate these variants to actual patterns in American life.

Our interest is not to compare the movie world with the real-life world so as to ascertain to what extent the movies reproduce existing conditions or deviate from them. We are rather concerned with the ways in which movie plots express psychological dispositions of the culture in which they are produced and consumed. Limitations of space prevent us from presenting all the major recurrent movie plot structures in this vein. To illustrate our approach, we shall discuss only some aspects of the treatment of love in our films.

UNCONVENTIONAL MEETINGS

A major tendency in the treatment of love in contemporary American films is the attempt to combine the appeal of the conventional and unconventional in a single relationship. This is expressed in the manner in which the hero and heroine become acquainted. There is a marked preference for showing the first meeting as a self-introduction, frequently occurring between the hero and heroine in complete isolation, or in an impersonal milieu surrounded by strangers. Such unconventional meetings are preferred in the pictures analyzed to

formal introductions in a ratio of about three to one.

The manner and place of the first meeting underscore its unconventionality. One third of the self-introductions are pickups. Usually initiated by the man, they take place mainly on the street, in trains, or in cheap places of entertainment. Equally frequent is the sudden irruption of one partner into the life of the other. One third of the self-introductions take this form, again with a predominance of male initiative. The hero of "Somewhere in the Night," fleeing from his underworld pursuers, breaks into the dressing room of the startled heroine, a night-club singer. In "The Kid from Brooklyn," the hero rushes into the heroine's bedroom to telephone for a veterinary obstetrician for his parturient milk wagon horse. In one of the exceptional cases of female initiative, the heroine forces her way into the apartment of the hero, her favorite mystery story writer, to urge him to help her solve a mystery ("Lady on a Train").

Professional contacts also provide a basis for self-introduction. However, the professional contexts or incidents are usually out of the ordinary. For instance, the hero may meet the heroine in the course of his work as a private detective, in an atmosphere of danger and pursuit. Other occasions for self-introduction are head-on collisions and rescues of women in distress. Least frequently self-introductions occur in a context of normal social life.

The isolation of the couple at their first meeting is emphasized by the fact that they are apt to be either entirely alone or in a milieu of complete strangers. In only about one third of the cases is anyone else present who is

known to either member of the couple. Where such familiar persons are present, they are more frequently acquaintances of the heroine than of the hero, thus maintaining a vestige of conventionality. In several cases the bystanders are mutual acquaintances, but this is considerably less frequent than the cases where the bystanders are known to only one member of the couple. A social setting common to both is thus the least frequent.

Conventional desires

The result of these many unconventional meetings is exactly the same as that of proper introductions. The man meets a sweet nice girl (though she may appear excitingly bad for some time), and the girl meets a fine young man whose intentions are entirely honorable. So, for instance, the sailor in "Deadline at Dawn" soon discovers that the dime-a-dance girl whom he has picked up yearns only to return to her home town while she fends off unattractive men for a living. The girl finds that the sailor, who at first aroused her suspicions, is a helpless child towards whom she soon feels quite maternal. In "Blue Dahlia," where the woman picks the man up on a highway at night, they both turn out to be sterling characters, though for some time he is suspected of murder and she appears to be a gangster's moll.

In several cases the hero and heroine might have been properly introduced if they had not saved themselves from it by an earlier unconventional approach. In "Because of Him," for instance, the couple are introduced by a mutual acquaintance shortly after the hero has tried to pick up the heroine on the street. In some cases the attempts of friends or family to introduce or to promote a proper acquaintance have a directly negative effect. In "Pride of the Marines," the hero, who boards with

a family of old friends, is urged by his landlady to make the acquaintance of a nice girl whom she strongly recommends. The hero feels that he is being trapped and treats the girl very rudely at their first meeting. Later, when the girl has snubbed him, he picks her up at a street corner, forcing her to get into his car by telling the bystanders that she is his wife and has deserted their children. This unconventional approach removes the curse of the formal introduction, and the affair assumes a promising aspect.

The unconventionality of these pickup relations rarely extends beyond the first meeting. The movies express the longing not so much to depart from the conventional as to spice it up with unconventional details. The feeling seems to be that nothing is more dull than to meet as father and mother did; no one is less romantic than an old friend of the family. There is a longing for the exotic, the new, the unfamiliar, the non-familial. At the same time this longing does not go very far. It is impeded by the opposite longing, that for the nice girl and the fine, clean-cut young man. The characteristic American solution, as indicated by the films, is that we can have both together. We can have the appearance of unconventionality, the stimulating beginning of picking up a stranger in an alien locale. At the same time we feel relieved when this turns out to be a mere appearance.

Contrasted with European pattern

The illicit quality, which is given to the couple's relation by their mode of meeting, is displaced from the major relationship to a minor incident, and is safely confined to this detail. There is no tendency for a small unconventional act to involve greater, unforeseen irregularities. The American movies seem to be in marked contrast in this respect to one of the traditions of continental European films, which tended to use street

pickups as preludes to danger, disgrace, and even death.¹ The difference in feeling here is perhaps related in part to the greater social mobility in America. The danger of losing status by inappropriate associations is not felt to be very serious. There also seems to be a denial of sexual dangers. The strange man or woman is not really dangerous but only seems so for a moment, evoking an old myth of sexual fatality which we no longer believe.

THE BEGINNING AND THE END

If we compare the first meeting of the couple with the last view which we have of them at the end of the film, we get further confirmation of the point that the relationship which begins unconventionally ends in a conventional way. The couple are much less likely to be left alone together for their final embrace than they were for their first handshake. Where three out of four couples introduced themselves, meeting for the most part either in complete isolation or in an impersonal milieu where no one was paying any attention to them, there is only a fifty-fifty chance that the couple will be alone at the end. This is the more remarkable since it is more usual in life, and more appropriate for love-making, for the couple to be increasingly by themselves as their relation progresses. However, of the couples whom we see together at the end of the film, only half are alone. Even of those that are alone, one third are last seen in a public rather than a private place. For instance, the hero and heroine of "Weekend at the Waldorf," who met when he smuggled himself into her bedroom, have their final encounter as he flies over New York in a plane and she

waves a large handkerchief from the Waldorf tower.

Of the couples who are last seen surrounded by people, about half are in the company of common acquaintances. This is an interesting contrast to the tendency to eliminate common acquaintances from the first meeting. The common milieu of the couple is thus not one of a shared background, but rather one that they acquire in the course of their association. Or, in several cases, the friends of one partner become friends of the other also.

Sometimes, where the couple have both their first and last encounters in a relatively impersonal crowd, they are less alone in the crowd at the end than at the beginning. In "Because of Him," the hero first tried to pick up the heroine on a busy street where the passers-by were not particularly interested in them. In the final scene, the couple are embracing on the stage of a large theater (she has just had a successful debut in a play which he has written), and a large audience is watching and applauding them. There are, of course, several films which give the couple greater privacy at the end than they had at their first meeting, but the opposite tendency is much more prominent.

The recurrent final embrace before witnesses resembles a marriage ceremony, for which it is perhaps a substitute representation. Relationships which have begun in an unconventional way do not develop into anything which must be kept secret or out of sight. Also, from the American point of view, a considerable part of the satisfaction in having acquired an attractive partner comes from showing him or her off to the admiration and envy of others. A secret love does not fulfill this requirement. The scene of the happy couple embracing on a stage before a large applauding audience satisfies the need much better.

¹ Cf. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), pp. 119-120, 157-158, 194-195. A recent Swedish film, *Torment* (1946), has a similar theme.

CONFLICT BETWEEN SACRED AND PROFANE LOVE

The combination of sacred and profane love in a single relationship constitutes one of the major pervasive themes of American films. The possibility of developing a conventional relation from unconventional beginnings is one illustration of this theme. Of deeper significance is the emergence of a group of heroines who combine the charms of good and bad girls.

Freud has pointed out that the difficulty of choosing between a good and a bad girl constitutes one of the major problems in the love life of western men. The difficulty is that of fusing two impulses in relation to the same woman. On the one hand, there are sexual impulses which a man may feel to be bad and which he may therefore find it hard to associate with a woman whom he considers fine and admirable. The image, and the actuality, of the "bad" woman arise to satisfy sexual impulses which men feel to be degrading. On the other hand, there are affectionate impulses which are evoked by women who resemble the man's mother or sister, that is to say, "good" women. A good girl is the sort that a man should marry, but she has the disadvantage of not being sexually stimulating.

SOLUTIONS TO CONFLICT

In nineteenth century

There are various possible solutions to this conflict. The attempt may be made to satisfy one of these impulses at the expense of the other, to satisfy them both but with different women, or to combine the two impulses in a single relationship. For instance, in Victorian England the major approved solution was to renounce profane love in favor of the sacred variety. A rebellion against this Victorian ideal is expressed in Swinburne's "Dolores," an attempt to go to

the opposite extreme of sexual satisfaction unmingled with affection. A different solution was the pattern supposedly frequent in France and Italy, in which a man would keep both a wife and a mistress. The frequent nineteenth-century fantasy of the saintly prostitute, of the Camille type, represented an attempt to combine sex and affection, to imagine a woman toward whom both feelings could be expressed.

In Hollywood films

The solution favored by current American films is another variant of the combination of sex and affection in a single relationship. The image of what we may call a "good-bad girl" has been created. The good-bad girl differs from the saintly prostitute of the last century in that she is not really bad, but only appears bad. After her apparent badness has been sufficiently established to make her sexually exciting, it is explained away as a false impression, created by ambiguous circumstances, and the hero is left with a warm-hearted, loving girl whom he can marry and settle down with. At the same time she retains the glamorous appearance and bold manners which made it so easy to believe in her wickedness.

Usually the good-bad girl appears to be promiscuous, or to be involved with a bad man (a gangster or Nazi). Occasionally she appears guilty of theft or murder. In "Gilda," the title character (after whom the Bikini bomb was named) is the most thoroughgoing example of a heroine who looks wildly promiscuous through the greater part of the film, and who in the end turns out to be a faithful and devoted woman who has never loved anyone but the hero. Gilda and the hero had been lovers before the action of the film begins, and had separated because of his jealousy. When they meet again the hero has become the right-hand man

of a big gambler and international schemer; Gilda has become the gambler's wife. The hero is tortured not only by seeing Gilda as his boss's wife, but also by her strenuous flirtations with other men. Eventually the boss disappears and is considered dead. Gilda has tried to persuade the hero of her continued love for him, and he now agrees to marry her. But he still does not believe in her. To punish her for her apparent infidelities to the boss and to himself, he holds her a virtual prisoner. His strong-arm men follow her wherever she goes and forcibly dissuade her admirers. One night Gilda appears at the swank night club adjoining the gambling casino which the hero now runs. She sings and dances with great seductiveness and finally begins stripping off her clothes (she doesn't get much farther than her long black gloves) while men from the audience rush forward to assist her. The hero, who enters just in time to get an agonizing glimpse of the climax of the performance, sends his men to carry her out. While episodes of this sort present vividly the image of the beautiful promiscuous woman, they are interspersed with other occasions when Gilda pleads with the hero to believe that she has never loved anyone but him. In the end it turns out that what the hero thought he saw was a deceptive appearance, and what Gilda told him was entirely true. An understanding police official, who interests himself in their affairs, persuades the hero of this. All of Gilda's carryings-on with other men have been motivated by her love for the hero, whom she wished to hold by making him jealous. Once this has been explained to the hero by an impartial observer, he finally recognizes her for what she is: a good girl who loves only him.

In other cases the good-bad girl is not so completely free from taint, but still she turns out to be less bad than

she had seemed, or there are strong extenuating circumstances for a lapse which is in any case temporary. The heroine of "Strange Love of Martha Ivers" manifests a complicated combination of real badness, seeming badness, and goodness. The girl has just come out of jail, to which she had been sent for stealing a fur coat. She explains to the hero that the coat was given to her by a boy friend who later disappeared. Thus she did not really steal the coat, but wasn't she rather friendly with the thief? In another episode she is forced by the wicked district attorney, who is still pursuing her for the crime she did not do, to play a trick on the hero. She induces him to go with her to a café where, by prearrangement, a man comes up and claims to be her husband. The pretendedly outraged husband demands that the hero come outside and fight. The hero is then forced into a waiting car in which several thugs beat him up. The heroine later has a chance to explain the whole thing to the hero; she really has no husband, and so on. In this series of bad appearances and virtuous explanations, one or two bad things remain that are not explained away. However, since the girl repeatedly turns out to be so much better than she seemed, there is probably the illusion that with a few more explanations, for which perhaps the film did not have time, she could be shown to be completely good. An atmosphere is created in which both the affirmation and the denial of the girl's badness have a strong emotional impact. They do not entirely cancel each other out, since it is most satisfying to believe both.

In foreign films

The good-bad girl seems to be a peculiarly American solution to the problem of two types of women. A comparison with films of other countries seems to indicate certain marked differ-

ences. A recent British film, "Madonna of the Seven Moons," deals with the two-types problem in a different way. The heroine is a dual personality. Most of the time she is a rather prim and stately wife and mother, devoted to her family and to good works, but every so often her other personality takes possession of her. She completely forgets her usual life, assumes a gypsy-like costume and abandon, and runs away to join her lover, a dark and passionate underworld character. The development in this good woman of a wild character is attributed to a girlhood seduction at the hands of a dark vagabond. The British film seems to say rather gallantly that it is the fault of a bad man if the sexy potentialities of a good woman are brought to the surface. The same woman can be both good and bad, but she does not have both characters in relation to the same man. This contrasts with the American good-bad girl pattern, according to which the girl always appears to the same man in both her aspects. The bad component appears much more dissociated and alien in the British version than in the American. It is significant that the fiery lover is an Italian. There is much less feeling in the American films of the irretrievable harm that men can do to women if they are not careful. The American good-bad girl survives her adventures unharmed. The British heroine can only escape her double life by dying.

French films seem to persist in maintaining the separation of good and bad women. The hero, placed between a good and a bad woman, is more attracted to the bad one. Attempts at fusion tend to take the form of having the bad woman converted from perennial promiscuity to true love by the right man. In a recent French film, "Macadam" (1947), a young sailor is shown pursuing a promising friendship with a rather

severely good girl. A young prostitute seduces the sailor, and he immediately loses interest in the good girl, even treating her quite rudely. The prostitute at the same time falls in love with the sailor, and a stable relationship is established between them. In this and other French films, the promiscuous woman is shown as not being bad at heart. This is what redeems her. No attempt is made, as in the American films, to explain away her promiscuity as merely apparent.

German pre-Hitler movies seem to have expressed an even stronger duality of good and bad women. The man moves between the good woman who is safe, domestic, and dull and the bad woman who will lure him to his destruction.²

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE VAMP

The good-bad girl of the recent American films has put the old-style vamp out of business. The vamps of the twenties were dangerous women who unscrupulously used their sexual appeal to ruin men. Men were fascinated and bound by these women who alone could offer them the dizzy excitement of sex. Sex in those days was more mysterious, a dark rite of which the wicked woman was the priestess. It retained some of the aura of Biblical sin. One has only to recall, for instance, Greta Garbo in "Flesh and the Devil," the story of the fatal woman destroying the friendship of two fine men by becoming the mistress of one and the wife of the other. As the old preacher explains to the hero, when the devil cannot find any other way to tempt a man, he sends a beautiful woman. This image of the dangerous woman has disappeared. In the good-bad girl the hero can find sex and

² Kracauer, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-120, 126, 216. Comparison with these German films is, of course, subject to the limitation that they are not contemporary.

a square deal at the same time. Bad girls still remain, but they have mainly lost their hold on men. They have become rather a pathetic lot, hankering after heroes for whom they have no appeal.

The issue between the two types of women appears mainly in the films which one may call "male melodramas," revolving around the love and hate problems of a central hero. In films of this type, 80 per cent have a good-bad girl as the main female character. In about 50 per cent of the cases, the good-bad girl is opposed to a straight bad girl, over whom she regularly wins out. In approximately 30 per cent, the good-bad girl occupies the center of the stage alone. In only 20 per cent is the issue one between a bad girl and a simple good girl, a contest in which the good girl does not always win.

The difference between the bad and the good-bad girls is mainly that the bad girls really are what the good-bad girls only seem to be, that is, promiscuous, involved with bad men, and criminal. In "Blue Dahlia," the hero returns from the war to find his wife drunk in the midst of a wild party, and on terms of obvious intimacy with an older man who later turns out to be a gangster. After the party has dispersed, she completes the alienation of her husband's affections by admitting that their baby was killed in an auto accident caused by her drunken driving. In "The Big Sleep," the bad sister of the heroine is a nymphomaniac who has killed a man who repulsed her advances. In "Strange Love of Martha Ivers," the bad woman has a long list of crimes to her credit, including murder and theft. In each of these cases, the bad girl loses out to a good-bad girl who is equally alluring and less harrowing to have around.

The majority of bad girls fail to win the love of the men they want. Fre-

quently they experience the frustrating combination of being repulsed by the men they love and pursued by men whom they dislike. Only a small minority are happy in love. The good-bad girl, on the other hand, always gets her man. She is frequently pursued by other men as well, who help to provide an atmosphere of desirability.

The disappearance of the vamp is further evident if we compare movie spy types of World War I and World War II. The earlier beautiful spy, like Mata Hari, for instance, was an irresistible woman who lured men from the opposite side to betray their secrets to her. She was quite cold and ruthless until the day when she fell in love with one of her victims. At this point her employers always had to shoot her; like a horse that has broken a leg, she was no longer useful. This spy legend was another version of the prostitute ennobled by love. In contrast to this, World War II women spies are shown as clean-cut American girls doing a patriotic job. They do not have to be redeemed by love since they are good all along; and they are always in love with men on their own side. The enterprising girl from home is thus substituted for the alluring foreign woman.

MOVIE TRENDS AND OTHER CULTURE TRENDS

The tendency to combine all satisfactions in one relationship, symbolized by the figure of the good-bad girl, may be related to various other trends in American culture. The ideal of monogamy still persists, but hedonistic demands, developing in part from an economy of abundance, urge the satisfaction of every need. The combination of these two trends leads to the expectation of finding one person who will satisfy every wish. The strength of this expectation is attested by the high divorce rate. Disillusionment with a marriage partner

cannot be mitigated by supplementary satisfactions on the side. The longing is to begin all over again and try to find the perfect person.

The uncompromising demand to have everything seems to be more marked in Americans than in Europeans. There is little readiness to accept compromises, much less to make renunciations. The more characteristically European solutions of the two-types problem seem to express an underlying resignation. There is more the feeling that one can't have everything, that life is necessarily haunted by regrets for missed opportunities, that a certain amount of frustration is inevitable, that the attempt to get too much is likely to involve fatal conflicts. The American feeling seems to be less tragic. The belief that you can eat your cake and have it still seems strong. The hero of the American films happily survives the conflicts of love and hate which have so often been fatal for dramatic heroes of other times and places.

The real-life counterpart of the good-bad girl has probably developed with the increasing sexual accessibility of good girls. Terman, for instance, pointed out the continuously increasing trend in women toward premarital sexual relations. With this development, the prostitute becomes less necessary, and the sheltered innocent less frequent. The two corresponding images tend to lose their hold on imagination. On the one hand, the seductress, more or less glorified, tends to fade out. On the other hand, the sweet helpless girl, whom the good man had to protect against the *roué*, also disappears.

Another real-life development, related to the disappearance of two-typism, seems to be that an increasing number of urban women try, and succeed more or less, to remain glamorous looking for an indefinite length of time. To have an appearance which proclaims the comfortable homey wife and mother is felt as a failure. The image of a mother is being transformed in the direction of a continuity between mother and glamour girl. This is illustrated in a recent series of advertisements featuring "model mothers," i.e., professional models who continue their careers after becoming mothers, and who appear no less glamorous when they have one or two pretty children in the picture with them.

Another relevant real-life factor may be that educated parents have been trying to be more moderate in imposing sexual taboos on their children. Possibly the impression of the extreme badness of sex has been less firmly implanted in childhood than was formerly the case. This would weaken the adult tendency to conceive of sex as something shady, secret, and separate from the rest of life.

The movie image of the good-bad girl expresses the feeling that sexual needs can be satisfied by a good girl, that they no longer require involvement with a dangerous bad woman. However, the split in the good-bad girl image suggests that the sexual component is not entirely assimilated. In order to be sexually stimulating, the good girl must retain a semblance of badness, particularly in the form of seeming to be involved with other men. A lingering association of sex and wickedness remains.

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